



There was plenty of work to go around during the Evergreen Cemetery Restoration project.

Restoring Dignity

Story by Gerald W. Rogers
Photos by Graciela Noriega

TWELVE years ago, retired LTC Guthrie Ashton visited the Evergreen Cemetery in Richmond, Va., only to find it in a state of disrepair. That day he promised to return to Evergreen, to restore its pride and luster.

Now, with the help of 100 Army Junior ROTC cadets from five Richmond-area high schools and a team from AmeriCorps' National Civilian Community Corps, Ashton has begun to fulfill that promise.

Gerald W. Rogers works for the Marketing and Public Affairs Directorate, U.S. Army Cadet Command, at Fort Monroe, Va.

Armed with weed-whackers, saws, scythes, clippers and a hearty dose of enthusiasm, the team, led by Ashton, cleared the jungle-like vegetation that had engulfed the historic black cemetery that predates the Civil War.

The Evergreen is the final resting place of many renowned Richmonders, including crusader journalist John Mitchell Jr., who died in 1929, and banker Maggie L. Walker, who died in 1934.

The team's mission was to reopen cobblestone pathways that lead to grave sites hidden in the thick brush, said Ashton, who is the senior Army



Historic Evergreen Cemetery in Richmond, Va., was in total disrepair before Army JROTC and AmeriCorps teamed up to restore it.

JROTC instructor at Wythe High School.

Until recently, families of the people buried at both Evergreen and the nearby East End Cemetery were responsible for maintaining the



The AmeriCorps-Army JROTC team spent long hours, under a sweltering summer sun, restoring the original state of the grave site of famed Richmonder and crusading journalist John Mitchell Jr.

individual plots. The plants grew up as relatives forgot, moved away or died. Burials still go on in a cleared area of Evergreen.

National Park Service ranger Jim Bell, who has long been an advocate for the two cemeteries, welcomed the effort.

"This is historic as well as sacred ground and provides a wonderful way to learn about people and families who have contributed so much to Richmond," he said.

Bell has been on a rescue mission for the cemeteries since being assigned

to the Maggie L. Walker Historic Site in Richmond three years ago.

Walker was a prominent civic and fraternal leader who is said to be the first female bank president in the United States. Bell found that the Evergreen graves of Mrs. Walker and her family were not well tended.

Along with assigning 10 of its service volunteers to help supervise the cleanup, AmeriCorps provided \$40,000 in grants to cover student expenses during the month-long project. Ashton said the cadets also received classes in Standards of Learning testing for science, social studies, English and math.

"The project was a cooperative venture of the AmeriCorps, Richmond public schools, City Hall agencies and private firms, with the full support from East End Councilwoman Delores L. McQuinn," he explained.

AmeriCorps Team Leader Graciela Noriega saw the project as a great character builder.

"When the kids first started this project," she said, "they saw it as a lot of hard, backbreaking work. Now, most of them promised me and themselves they would keep the project alive until the cemeteries are completely restored."

Ashton said the student effort gave the clean-up project a good start. "It will probably take about four years of hard work to fully restore the burial grounds." □

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